

James Watts

Beasts of Sorrow

Chapter One

Since the passing of her husband, a loyal companion of nearly half of a century, the small vegetable garden out back of her house had become a place of Zen. It was here where Mildred Blevins spent most of her afternoons, under the caress of a warm Alabama sun, nourishing her garden. Snap peas, okra, yellow squash, tomatoes, all nurtured by her hand, growing on the love of a woman who knew no joys in life other than tending to their needs. It was here where she first saw him, standing just outside the chain-link fence separating her property and the expanse of untamed field leading to highway 78. He stood against the wind, wisps of corn silk blond hair licking at the light cool breeze, cold, searching blue eyes locking her where she knelt, trowel in one hand, a stringy clot of weeds in the other. He was young, no older than nineteen, and out of place standing there wearing a worn leather bomber with a plain dull red sweater underneath. His blue jeans were tattered and stained, and the work boots on his feet looked to have traveled thousands of miles, soles held together by strips of duct tape and laces that were as fuzzy as a

“Mom?” He spoke softly as in a dream.

Mildred stood up on swaying legs. Then, steadying herself, she dropped the trowel and moved toward him, tears streaking her cheeks, and watched as her baby boy, her first-born, vanished into nothingness. Mildred dropped back to her knees, drew the soil-stained palms of her hands to her face, and wept.

The second time her dead son had come to her, Mildred Blevins was cleaning out the loft of the barn behind her house, located just a few feet away from her small vegetable garden. Mildred’s daughter and son-in-law, Megan and Jeremy Stevens, had asked if they could use the old barn to start up a small business producing and selling Jeremy’s woodcrafts, and Megan’s hand-sewn quilts.

“We can have a gravel parking lot on the other side of the barn for our customers,” Megan had said. “And Jeremy’s friend Davis, the one who’s going to update the wiring and add the plumbing for us, has a cousin that’s willing to cut us a driveway to the road.”

Mildred had never been able to say no to Megan, especially after her son’s death. Ronnie’s death was so sudden and so harsh, and at such a young age, that she could not bear for something to happen to Megan and to know that she had refused her daughter anything. So, doing what any mother, or in her opinion what any *reasonable* mother would do with the paranoia of losing another child, both in spirit and mortal form, she had said yes without the first hint of hesitation.

So, on a smoldering hot day in June, Mildred had begun cleaning out the barn, first the ground level, which she had the help of the Owen twins from across the street for the heavy stuff, then the loft. The heaviest items up there were a couple of old wicker chairs that had at one time resided on the big covered front porch of her house. Sure, Mildred was getting on in years, but she was not so old that she could not handle a couple of old wicker chairs, not in the least. Beyond that, all there was to the loft was a little sweeping and dusting, and the rest she would leave for Megan.

There were four windows in the loft, one for each direction on the compass. It was the East window, the one overlooking the large field that would soon serve as her daughter and son-in-law's parking lot, that she saw Ronnie the second time. Mildred had strayed over to the window with intentions of raising it, hoping to catch a breeze to cool things down a bit. As she did, she let out a terrified gasp but managed to remain conscious. Again, Ronnie had decided to visit her, this time dressed in the navy blue and gray uniform, the number twelve printed across his chest, that he wore when he played football for Jericho Hills High. He was holding his helmet under his right arm and his hair, which on his last visit had seemed so alive, fell over his shoulders in a wet, bloody clump. Ronnie's skin was corpse pale, and he was looking up at Mildred with one dead eye, the right eye had popped from its socket and rested against his right cheek. The top half of his scalp had peeled away from his head, and his smile changed into a rictus filled with broken, jagged, and bloodstained teeth. Seeing this, Mildred fainted.

As Mildred Blevins' daughter was helping her to her feet from the loft floor of her old barn, Benjamin Belvedere was shifting his '98 Ford Mustang into park in front of an old blue farmhouse along Sycamore Street. Nearly all the houses along Sycamore were older farmhouses of varying colors, except for a couple of ranch-style homes and one well-kept stucco house on the southern corner. Nostalgia crept through him, causing a small smile to curve his mouth. The people living on Sycamore Street kept their yards manicured with professional quality, landscaped with either hedge bushes or roses, and bordered by either chain-link or picket fences. All of it reminded Ben of the street where he grew up. And just like where he had spent his childhood days, there were sidewalks on both sides of the street, which held few occupants this early in the day, and Sycamore trees, the street's namesake, dotted both sides with old wrought-iron street lamps planted between every other pair.

A twinkle of light snagged Ben's attention and he looked through his windshield to the end of the street where Sycamore crossed over to Cedar Avenue. An older model Ford Taurus was turning onto Sycamore from Hadley Road. On its roof, amber light flashed in short, sporadic bursts from a small bubble over the passenger's side. The car came to a stop out front of the driveway belonging to the stucco home and a tanned arm shot out from the passenger window and flipped open the mailbox. Retreating into the car, the arm reappeared seconds later to stuff the box with mail before shutting it back. Ben checked his watch. It was a quarter past ten a.m. The lady he'd come to see about the room should be up. Probably watching soap operas and snacking on chips, maybe cleaning the house. Whatever the case, Ben hoped the room was still available.

Using his rearview mirror to check his hair, and to verify there was no food stuck in his teeth, Benjamin, or Ben to those who knew him, which happened to be very few, snatched the flyer with "Room for Rent" printed across its center in bold lettering from the passenger's side seat. Ben took in a deep breath and exhaled slowly before opening his car door and stepping out. This would be like the five-hundredth room he had rented in his last fifteen years drifting around the States. Okay, five hundred may be a little exaggerated, but it sure as hell felt that way.

Standing on the sidewalk, flyer in one hand, car keys dangling from the fingers of the other, Ben experienced a familiar tightening in his gut. Dressed in his best short-sleeved button-up shirt, opened at the collar to reveal a plain white tee, his newest, cleanest pair of jeans, and a pair of black Nike high-top sneakers on his feet, Ben still could not help but have a little trepidation in climbing the front steps and ringing the doorbell. The right breast pocket of his shirt concealed a

dilapidated note pad, which contained Benjamin's list of references, or at least a list of those landlords he had managed not to piss off. The little worn book also had in its contents work references of those former employers that thought fondly of his time in their employ. The references for both work and rentals were solid, he had no doubt whatsoever about that, but still, he was nervous.

Ben had left his hometown of Cradle Caverns, Virginia on his twentieth birthday, and somewhere along his nomadic trek around the country, he had developed a case of hair-trigger nerves. However, these nervous attacks were not constant, but rather random, generally triggered in areas that masked the darkness hidden within with the mundane to the exuberant residents living their lives in selective blindness. And the town of Jericho Hills was one of those areas. He had sensed this when he had turned off highway 78 onto Old Mill road. Driving along the old, faded asphalt, bordered by open fields with sparse cropping of trees, Ben had experienced a slight unease birthing and had considered turning around and trying his luck elsewhere.

That is just what he would have done, had he not spotted the town limits sign ahead of him, and the town ahead of that. At seeing the sign, an overwhelming urgency to continue onward into the town of Jericho Hills reverberated through him, an inaudible cry for help that grew louder inside his head the nearer to town the Mustang took him.

As he had navigated the streets of Jericho Hills, desperate to locate the address on the room-for-rent flyer in his passenger seat, Ben had studied the few residents that moved along the sidewalks or had stood out front of one business or the other. For every smiling face, Ben had imagined he saw the skeletal visages of the damned staring directly at him as if they knew what he was, what he had been through during his travels. At the sight of every raised hand, he had imagined them holding knives or bludgeons, waiting to maim or cripple or worse. Ben had shaken these images off and had continued his search. He marked this off to an overactive imagination, nothing like the trouble he had run into in Atlanta by no means, surely not.

The Past is the past, brother, Ben thought. Let it rest.

Taking another deep breath for reassurance, Ben climbed the steps and strode to the front door. The door was made of some thick wood Ben did not recognize, and the frosted glass at its center was oval-shaped with beveled edges. Although densely frosted, Ben still attempted to peer through it, but could only make out outlines of the objects inside. Then, reaching out with his left hand, index finger poised over the doorbell, apprehension stole through him, and once more Ben considered turning on his heels and beating the wind out of Jericho Hills. Yet once again, that plea for help filled his head. It was not a vocal cry, mind you, but an emotional distress signal that pinged around inside his head like an out-of-control pinball.

Stop being a big baby. Those days are over. You're just feeling the residual emotional fallout from all the creepy little towns you've shackled up in over the years.

Shelving his doubts away, Ben rang the doorbell. A couple of minutes passed and he was about to try it again when the door creaked open and a pair of dark brown eyes locked with his blue ones.

"Something I can help you with, young man?" The woman asked. She was old, not *Tales from the Crypt* old, but at least in her late seventies, and short, somewhere around five feet was Ben's guess. She was dressed in a tan tee-shirt and a pair of red sweatpants with a pink fanny pack strapped around her waist and a pair of fuzzy light blue house shoes covering her feet. Her medium tanned skin was covered in liver spots and taut. Her hair was stark white with wisps of black around her ears and pinned into a bun.

"Ms. Sharon Tidwell?" Ben asked.

"I'm her," Tidwell said, watching Ben closely. "But Miss Tidwell will do. Husband passed near fifty years ago. I suppose you're here for the room."

"Yes, mam," Ben replied.

"You in any trouble with the law?" Tidwell asked. "I'll have no part of warrant dodgers in my home."

"No, mam. No warrants or trouble of any kind. Only thing I'm running from is a rotten childhood." Ben managed a smile, hoping it was a convincing one. He had run into trouble during his time on the road but had never served time and as far as he knew no law enforcement agencies were searching for him, or anyone else for that matter.

"How about the drugs and drinking? I'll not have any boozers or dope heads in my house either. Fond of the drink or big kid candy, are you?"

"No, mam. Strongest drink I take is soda, and I've never touched the drugs." And that was true too, except for the three or four times he had shared a joint with his friends as a teenager.

Sharon Tidwell looked him over a bit longer, a curious gleam in her eyes. Ben knew what she was doing, old but sharp was Miss Tidwell, and she was reading him. She was gauging his body language, his facial expressions made in response to her questions, and even the tone of his voice. As shrewd an interviewer as she was, if allowed into her home, Ben doubted her prying to come to a halt, not until she was satisfied that Ben was not Ted Bundy or Albert Fish. Ben also realized that attempting to lie to Miss Tidwell in any form would most likely be a futile endeavor, as she would most definitely know he was lying the minute he opened his mouth.

"The room's on the top floor, northwestern corner of the house overlooking the backyard," Tidwell said. "It's a ten-by-twelve space, not too big, but has a twin-sized bed, dresser, nightstand, and chest. There's a small walk-in closet for additional storage. There's no television, but you can have one if you choose. There's also no box for cable, but you could hook straight into the jack, I suppose. It's just behind the dresser."

"Sounds great," Ben said. And it did. Ten-by-twelve was much larger than he had expected and larger than about ninety percent of the places he had laid his head in the last decade and a half.

Sharon opened the door wide enough for Ben to step through. "You seem honest enough, I imagine. Come on in and I'll give you the old guided tour, quote you a price, and if it's fair to you and all, and you still want the room, it's yours."

Relief swelled through him and his nerves dissipated. Ben was pretty sure he was going to take the room. Sharon Tidwell reminded him of his grandmother on his father's side, and was somewhat peaceable. She was the kind of woman that Ben imagined could be strict but fair. And she had that down-home vibe that truly honest, decent Southern people carried about them in a warmth that was almost a glow. Ben stepped through the door and into the foyer, nodding respectfully to the little old lady that reminded him of his grandmother, and stood by as she moved ahead of him, shutting the door behind her.

The floors of the old house were dark cherry polished to a near-perfect shine; the walls were chocolate crème with several framed pictures hanging from them indiscriminately. Just inside the front door on either side of the front entrance were doors, which Ben assumed were closets or some other storage space. Further into the foyer on the left was an arched doorway leading to the parlor, or the living room is how Miss Tidwell referred to it, and on his right was another arched doorway, this one leading to what she said, with a hint of sorrow in her voice, to her late husband's study. The stairwell to the second floor was on the right wall a few steps past the study. Adjacent to the stairs was a hallway leading to a closed door.

“Down the hall yonder,” Miss Tidwell pointed to the shut door at the end. “That’s where you’ll find the kitchen, dining room, and the stairs to the basement. There’s a utility room down there. You’re responsible for your own laundry, hear.”

Ben nodded.

“You also are responsible for your own groceries. You can have a mini-fridge in your room if you choose, but no microwaves or hotplates. You buy something needs heating or cooking, use the kitchen. We’ll talk more of those rooms if you agree on renting from me.”

“Yes, mam,” Ben replied.

“Guess you’re anxious to see yon suite you seek,” Miss Tidwell said, grabbing the stair railing and beginning her climb upward. “Follow me, young man.”

Ben climbed the stairs behind her. The steps were the same cherry wood as the floor, as was the trimming to all of the doors. There was a soft, moaning creak every other step, reminding Ben of the old black-and-white scare flicks he had watched as a kid. Of all the characteristics of older homes, creaks and moans were the ones he was fondest of. His liking for the old house grew more and more with every step.

At the top of the stairs, Ben noted that the doors, floors, trim, and walls were the same color scheme as the lower level with more framed pictures adorning them. Directly along his line of sight were five doors, two on the left wall, three to the right, and at the very end of the hall on the far wall between the last set of doors was a large picture window overlooking the back yard with a small card table and two chairs set before it. Another picture window overlooked the front yard and was adjacent to the sixth and final door on the second level. Set before it was a small, oval-shaped wooden table. A vase of daisies set at its center atop a doily made of white lace. This door, Miss Tidwell explained, led to the attic.

“Nothing up there but cobwebs and dust,” Miss Tidwell said, turning to face him. “And a whole heap of useless junk. Been considering cleaning it out and either adding more rooms up there or letting my long-timers use it to store some of their belongings. Cleaned the basement out about six months ago and added two bedrooms down there and a small den. You’ll also find the washer and dryer down there and an extra bathroom.”

Ben nodded thoughtfully, taking in all the old home had to offer, and of the childhood summers spent at his grandparent's old home back in Cradle Caverns.

“You are at the end of the hall on the left,” Miss Tidwell continued, “that is if you want the room, of course. Next door to you is Linda Henson, young woman, mid-twenties, been here a couple of months and tends to keep to herself. Across the hall from you is Gary McCarty, works as a janitor down at the elementary school, been here about three years. Good man, just worst luck I ever saw.”

Ben nodded knowingly, he could relate. He had run into his fair share of bad luck. The cluster fuck in Atlanta was a prime example, and one he hoped never repeated.

Miss Tidwell took a few steps onto the upstairs landing before turning back to him. “The door across the way from Miss Henson is another bathroom; there is a half-bath downstairs. Other than that one, and the one in the basement, that’s all there is, except the one in my room, and that one is off-limits to all tenants. And the last room up here, the one opposite the attic, is Joyce Williams. Middle-aged woman works for Billy Morgan that owns the Gas and Serve over on Wilcox Road. A fine woman she is and as kindhearted as they come. Been here going on two years. Now that you know your neighbors, let’s get a look at that room and see if it is somethin’ you may be interested in.”

As Ben followed Miss Tidwell down the hall, he learned the two remaining tenants in the basement was Paul Smith, an eighteen-year-old college-bound kid that worked for a fast-food chain called Bud's Burgers, he had been a tenant around two weeks, and Mike Tucker. Mike worked as a security guard somewhere in Birmingham. He had been Miss Tidwell's first tenant some five years before and recently moved into the basement after the remodel. Miss Tidwell said it was best to know those he would be living in such close vicinity with, as they would be sharing the utilities.

"Well, here we are," Miss Tidwell said, slipping a hand into the fanny pack around her waist and bringing out a set of keys on a metal ring. Each key had a small piece of notepaper taped onto it with the room numbers printed on them. She singled out the key with the number two on it and let the others slide to the bottom of the ring as she inserted it into the lock, turned it, and pushed the door inward. Reaching inside, and a little left of the doorway, she flipped a light switch and stepped inside.

Ben followed Miss Tidwell into room two and scanned it with excited scrutiny. Unlike the hall, a thick dove gray rug covered the floor from wall-to-wall, and the ceiling and walls were the color of storm clouds. Two windows graced the space, one that overlooked the side yard, and as promised, one overlooking the back yard. In front of the side window, was a twin-sized bed with a dark crimson comforter covering the mattress, and Ben figured that if he were to pull the comforter back, he would find matching sheets. The headboard of the small metal-framed bed was made of pressboard in a light cherry color and hid the lower half of the window and leaned slightly backward. At the foot of the bed was a cedar chest, which Ben thought had to be for extra storage. Wedged between the bed and wall was a small nightstand with a rather ancient looking lamp with a burgundy lampshade set on top of it.

To the right of the door was a dresser, same color as the bed and nightstand, and appearing to be made of the same material. Attached to it was a plain mirror. Built into the wall opposite of the prized window with the back-lawn view, was the closet; the doorframe and door were dark grays.

It's perfect, Ben thought.

As if reading his mind, Miss Tidwell said: "I take by the look on that mug of yours that you've taken a likin' to the place."

Ben mentally slapped himself for not being able to contain his excitement over having found such a great space, smiled, and said in as humble a voice as he could muster. "Yes, mam."

"My rate by the week is sixty, all utilities included. As I said before, you are responsible for your own groceries, marked with your name and room number, unless you opt to get a small fridge for the room. You buy your own laundry detergents and personal hygiene items, that should be a given. No pets, of course, but if you want a small fish aquarium, maybe a hamster or two, that'd be okay I imagine. We take our meals in the kitchen; I reserve the use of the dining room for holidays and birthdays. You can take meals in your room, but any stains on the carpet and you are responsible for having the carpet cleaned. Smoking is fine, as long as you burn incense, or candles to freshen the air. If you must smoke anywhere but your room, either do it outside or in the basement den. There's no curfew on when you come in at night, just be quiet about it. Respect the other tenants and me. Never come in here drunk or high, do that and I'll throw you out on your ass. If you want the room, I take the first month upfront and we go sit at the kitchen table to fill out the paperwork."

Ben gave the room a once over before replying, well aware that his decision to rent it remained firm. He loved the room, the old house in which it was located, and was growing fond

of Miss Tidwell. As for the town of Jericho Hills, Ben was not as confident, but he was willing to chance it.

Can't be any worse than anywhere else, Ben thought.

"I believe I'm going to take it," Ben said at last. "Feels right."

"Well, alright then. C'mon downstairs and we'll get the business end of this settled so you can bring your things in. Don't know where you came from, son, but you look about as tired as a spent workhorse."

Outside, the sun hid behind clouds impregnated with impending rain, and the skies darkened in resemblance of swollen bruises. Distant growls echoed around the small town of Jericho Hills, its residents preparing for the worst and praying for nothing more than a light shower. Tornados in Alabama shared a notorious past with destruction and the loss of lives. Sudden drops in barometric pressure had unleashed many funnel clouds upon the state, some mild, some containing strong gusts of whirling winds that ripped through homes and buildings of both wood and brick as easily as *The Big Bad Wolf* had blown over the house of straw in the tale of *The Three Little Pigs*. So, it was no wonder that residents of Alabama all, on some deeper level, feared the sight of an oncoming storm.

And there was an oncoming storm descending over Jericho Hills, just not the dreaded whirlwinds the people feared, but a storm of a more supernatural nature.